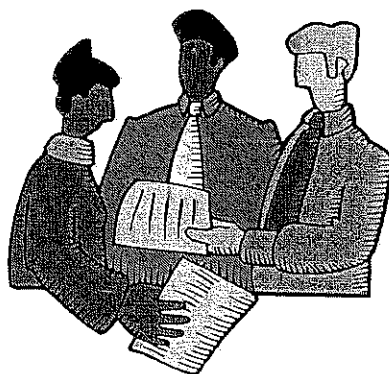


Collaborative Teams

Structures for Success



**Maryland State Department of Education
Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education
1999**

COLLABORATIVE TEAMS

Structures That Promote Success

COLLABORATIVE TEAMS

A collaborative team is a group of individuals who share common beliefs and work towards common goals. They meet regularly over an extended period of time. Collaborative planning and **teaming arrangements** for each school will be unique, based on the needs of the faculty and student population in a given year. Shared decision making, flexibility, and creative problem solving strategies will help teachers in *their* transition to restructured roles.

**COLLABORATIVE TEAMS
ARE ESSENTIAL FOR
IMPLEMENTING Inclusive
Education STRATEGIES**

COLLABORATIVE SKILLS

Teaching has been a profession in which **individuals** took responsibility for the outcomes of a group of students. It has *NOT* been a collaborative activity whereby a **group** of teachers work as colleagues, learning from each other and with each other for the purpose of developing creative instructional solutions through **shared responsibility** for the outcomes of a group of students.

Collaborative skills are *social skills, which help people work cooperatively and productively together*. One of the most important functions of the team is to use collaborative skills to create an atmosphere conducive to building trust, solving problems and resolving conflicts.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS and PRODUCTIVE TEAMS

When people sit around the table to meet, each one may have individual concerns and hopes about how the meeting will go, whether or not it will be productive, and how much the discussion will stay on task. Parents may be uncomfortable walking into a room in which all of the school staff have been assembled and may be insecure about voicing their feelings to people they do not really know. Teachers may not want to appear that they do not have the answer to a problem, especially in front of the parent or their principal. *Trust may not be there.*

*What affects everyone can
best be solved by everyone.*

In order to build trust and enable all to feel that they are a truly valued part of a whole, each team member needs to act trustworthy.

Each team member should:

- ✓ be on time for meetings
- ✓ contribute their opinions
- ✓ be honest
- ✓ complete assignments outside of meetings
- ✓ don't talk about others behind their backs
- ✓ treat others with respect
- ✓ give eye contact to the speaker
- ✓ asking questions related to the discussion
- ✓ paraphrase or summarize the points that are being made
- ✓ check for your understanding
- ✓ offer opinions and disagree respectfully and honestly
- ✓ compromise after discussion to reach agreement on next steps or decisions to be made
- ✓ demonstrate respect for ideas
- ✓ be critical of ideas, not of people
- ✓ during conflict, try to see the other person's perspective
- ✓ make decisions by building consensus, not by administrative directive or voting
- ✓ encourage other silent team members to voice their opinion
- ✓ support others who have larger tasks or busier schedules or who could benefit from your expertise
- ✓ share roles and responsibilities of running meetings and other team functions
- ✓ share the blame if decisions turn out to be bad ones or if plans are ineffective
- ✓ establish team goals and mutually agreed upon methods for running meetings
- ✓ be willing to share your personal feelings and something personal about yourself

PLANNING THE TEAM

Once a student has been identified as having intensive needs, an individual planning team should be established. Because it will not be efficient or logistically possible for the many teachers and support personnel who are usually involved with the student to be regular participators, the team should have *core* and *extended* components.

Core Team: The core team is a small group of people who meet regularly to do the majority of the planning and is made up of the people who are most involved with the student on a daily basis. These may include, for example, the student, the student's general class teachers (at least one or two), special and related or support services staff (if they are actively involved in direct or supported instruction), and the parent. The administrator is usually a member only when the school is just beginning to use team practices. Not more than 8 people!

Extended Team: The extended team is composed of people who are important to the student's educational program and are available to provide support to the team. These members may be previous or future teachers, special and related or support personnel (for example, guidance counselors, psychologists, or the student's peers), usually an administrator once team practices in the school are in place, and sometimes district support staff.

Once the team has been established, there are some questions that must be answered to ensure consistency, efficiency, and communication and to reduce confusion or misunderstandings:

Who assigns responsibilities to team members?

- *Who communicates information to members not attending a particular meeting?*
- *Who is the parent contact person?*
- *How do team members deal with situations where an individual is not contributing, not attending regularly, or is not following through with their responsibility?*
- *If additional meetings are scheduled, who has responsibility for arranging them?*
- *Who has the power to cancel a meeting, and for what reasons?*
- *When can meetings be regularly scheduled so that all members can attend?*
- *How can the family be encouraged to participate?*

TEAM MEETINGS

A regularly scheduled time and length of time needs to be set aside. It is expected that all members will consistently attend and contribute during meetings and will assume responsibility for work done outside of the team meeting. Individual student planning teams usually meet for one hour or less. A *structure* for the meetings and *roles* on the team need to be established, and the *processes* for problem solving and decision-making need to be worked out.

Agenda: Should be set at the end of each meeting for the next meeting. Time limits should be assigned to each item, so that there is a realistic expectation about what can be accomplished. Frequently, teams will begin spending 10 minutes on "successes" and may have a standing item on the agenda if there is one issue that is consistently addressed by the team (e.g., behavior support plan, participation in a particular subject area, peer support plan, etc.).

Roles: In order to use your limited time most efficiently and to improve collaboration and participation by all members, many teams assign roles that can be rotated among the members. Rotation may be by volunteering, by alphabetical order assignment, or any other way agreed upon by the group. Who will do what at a meeting is usually decided at the previous meeting. At a minimum, teams need to have a *facilitator*, a *recorder*, and a *timekeeper*. Other roles, which are helpful, particularly in the beginning of team formation, are *encourager*, *jargon buster*, and *observer*. These are described below.

Meeting Content: Some teams always begin their meetings spending 5 minutes on some recent success related to the student. Besides being an icebreaker, it sets a positive note and good feelings. If there is a major area that will be a consistent focus, the team may want to make this a standing agenda item. To allow for adequate discussion of items and to ensure that meetings don't go beyond the designated time (usually between 30 and 60 minutes), there are often not more than 3 to 5 items identified.

Team Decisions: Decisions made at the meeting that require action need to have the responsibility for that action assigned to individuals (or the group if the whole group will act) with a date specified by which the action will be taken.

Note Taking: Minutes or notes are critical to ensuring that all team members (present and absent) have the same information and can have a reminder of the topics covered, decisions made, tasks assigned, and responsibilities for between meetings. If a standard form is used, the recorder may take notes by hand and simply make copies of these notes at the end of the meeting for each member. It is helpful if the notes include columns for tasks or assignments and the person responsible and date that the task is due so that members can more easily remember their responsibilities.

TEAM MEMBER ROLES

Facilitator: distributes the written agenda, moves the team through the discussion of each item, ensures that the team remains task-oriented, and keeps team members focused on the team goals. The facilitator seeks to clarify information and opinions, seeks out the input of members who are silent, pulls together the major ideas, and restates or summarizes the major points or decisions that are made. The facilitator also helps to solve the interpersonal problems between members by promoting open discussion in order to resolve conflicts and develop consensus. The facilitator asks the team to set the agenda for the next meeting and, if roles rotate, identifies who will take what roles for the next meeting.

Recorder: writes down the agenda items and all agreed-upon outcomes of the meeting. The recorder should check to make sure there is consensus of opinion before recording outcomes. The reporter asks for clarifications and summarizes the group discussion to ensure accurate reporting.

Timekeeper: keeps track of the time spent on each item according to how much time the team originally allocated for it. S/He signals the group shortly before the time is up to allow the group to wrap up the discussion. If the item requires more time than has been allocated, the group can defer the item for additional discussion at the next meeting (making it an agenda item) or eliminate another item which has lower priority (moving that item to the next meeting). The team should generally not extend its meeting time.

Encourager: warmly encourages everyone to participate, recognizing contributions, demonstrating acceptance of ideas, and being generally responsive to team members. To assign this role may seem artificial at first, but without this role being taken, members may not be reinforced for participating. Once a team is experienced, this role usually doesn't need to be assigned - it just happens naturally.

Jargon buster: reminds team members when they are using words that are not commonly understood by everyone. Asking for translation into everyday language often reminds members that common sense should prevail.

Observer: observes the team action and interaction and gives feedback to team members as a group on how well they did in their assigned roles and on collaboration. This is often very awkward when a team is first forming, which is the most critical time for feedback to occur. Some teams will periodically assign an observer to identify areas for improvement.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF COLLABORATIVE TEAMS

1. **Participation and Leadership**

All team members must be viewed as *equals* and participation needs to be encouraged and supported. The leadership role for meetings and tasks is assigned to the individual with the greatest expertise, with the greatest time (where expertise is not a factor), or on a rotating basis for repeated tasks of joint responsibility. Some tasks are regularly performed by one individual, some are shared, and some are rotated. It is very important that all members regularly attend meetings; without this, individuals will not feel that they are responsible for decisions made by the group.

2. **Development of collaborative goals**

The goals and strategies of the team must be developed in a cooperative manner with a focus on the individual student. Articulating the team's goals is important to give the team direction in decision-making and to foster a clear understanding for the reason to gather and talk. Meeting the needs of individual team members must be secondary.

3. **Communication**

One of the biggest problems encountered by teams is the breakdown of communication or unclear communication channels. Team members must encourage each other to openly communicate their desires and concerns, with each member feeling comfortable enough to express opinions and thoughts on any issue, regardless of the extent of agreement with that opinion. Periodically, members need to revisit this topic to make sure that communications are clear, open, and encouraged.

4. **Decision Making**

The group of team members needs to come to agreement on *which and how* decisions will be made. Important decisions about team functioning and about the student should be the joint responsibility of all team members. Collaborative teams make decisions by consensus, which means that every member of the team agrees to the decision. Rather than a win and lose situation (as in voting), consensus means that everyone agrees to the decision following discussion by the group.

5. **Brainstorming**

When presented with a problem, it could be very unproductive and frustrating to keep talking about it and find no solution. Teams need to use some form of brainstorming technique to efficiently identify as many solutions as possible, and some way of either prioritizing or selecting the most useful alternatives. Brainstorming techniques involve some individual think time (usually 2 to 3 minutes) to come up with solutions that may be written to remember. A recorder should then write each idea down on a flip chart (either going around one at a time to each member or having all ideas called out) until no other ideas remain. This is usually followed by some wait time in which each member reviews the list and thinks about alternatives. These ideas may be clarified, prioritized, compared

to some set criteria for what the solutions need to have, or combined. After discussion, the team selects the best ideas for action.

6. Dealing with Conflict

Everyone will not always agree. However, collaborative teams are not competitive and there should be no winners and losers. Early in the formation of a team, members should discuss how they would deal with conflicting opinions in a productive manner and with respect for all viewpoints. In cases of disagreement, it is most important that opinions are heard and are treated with respect. All members should take part in the discussion. The team can agree to disagree, but it is most important that the team be prepared to not take or express opinions in a personal way. Strategies to resolve conflicts are:

☹ **Confront the conflict:** express your views and your feelings about it when you have the time to also listen and invite the opposition to do the same. Be prepared to calmly state your position and be prepared to listen.

✍ **Jointly define the conflict/issue:** discuss the problem and try to come to some agreement about what the problem is -- and define it as a mutual problem to be solved, not one that will be won or lost. This is the time to be sure that statements are about the issue and do not become personal.

! **Share your feelings and try to take the other person's perspective:** continually try to express yourself and clarify your position, while you are also trying to understand what the opposition thinks and feels. Try to understand what the motivations are for yourself as well as the other person(s) and work to think of ways to resolve the conflict that allow for the other person to gain as well.

☺ **Reach an agreement:** all participants in the conflict need to be satisfied with the outcome of the discussion and agree to be committed to decisions made. Before closing the discussion, the members should agree on the position to be taken and how to check on the decision made in future meetings. The team should discuss how to review the agreement and how to improve cooperation in the future.

